

Urbana Arts Grant- *Flash Photo Project*



Participant at Urbana Farmer's Market

In the Fall of 2018, I applied for the Urbana Arts Grant with the intent to endeavor upon an ambitious project: a mobile photo booth that delivers printable portraits. When I was notified of the good news in March 2019, that I had received the grant, I was overjoyed and could not wait to make a splash in this new community I found myself in (Champaign-Urbana). I wanted to capture the faces of the Latinx community, celebrate their presence, and elevate their voices through portraiture. However, my naiveté could not have accounted for the amount of time this project would take, my personal time constraints, my lack of resources, my failure to understand the community, and eventually a global pandemic. Although my intentions began with a Latinx-centric and high-art portrait perspective, this all shifted wildly over the life of the work. This report will highlight the successful moments and the challenges I faced while executing the project, *Flash Photo Project*, (formerly *Celebrando Latinidad*).

I. Trial Run, October 2019

I invited my Art Education grad cohort to do a trial run of the process I was drumming up, prior to executing this in the real world. I had my tripod, my backdrop set up, snacks, music, and I was ready to blow everyone's socks away. Some of my closest friends took time from their evenings to get their photos taken with me, bringing props and jovial attitudes. However, good times were short lived because I had some serious technical difficulties with my camera— all of a sudden the confidence I believed I had maneuvering this project became futile and I reached out to my photographer friend to assist me with troubleshooting. After an hour or so of fumbling about, we finally got some amazing portraits of the participants who patiently waited, which I later used for the flyer with their permission. (Figure 1) That trial run revealed to me that



Figure 1. Flyer for Orchard Downs photo session.

I was not only not equipped to run the booth by myself, but that I needed to create a smoother process for check-in, and delivery of photos, via email and in person. It was then that I made the decision to hire my photographer friend and now-husband Maxwell Heller, to assist me with this portraiture project, and began to take steps toward unveiling *Flash Photo Project* to the public.

II. Orchard Downs, November 2019

I reached out to the community recreation department at Orchard Downs, a grad housing neighborhood in Urbana, and requested the opportunity to do portraiture for the residents. They quickly set me up with a community liaison, and they made coordination an absolute breeze prior to and on the day of the shoot. I sent her the flyers I had made, and she hung them up throughout the community and sent email blasts to the residents. On the day of the shoot, I arrived to find the community liaison ready to help me set up, and assist me throughout the day. I set up the portrait studio with her and Maxwell's assistance, as well as a check-in station at the front of the building. My check-in process included a sign-in sheet,

release forms, and numbered slips that participants could match to my records to collect their photos.



Participants at Orchard Downs

We photographed 30+ people that day, all from different walks of life. Some were taking family photos, others took pregnancy shots, while others used the opportunity to take professional headshots. We allowed the participants to decide for themselves what kinds of photos they wanted, their background, and between Maxwell and I, we coached them into memorable and very sweet photos. One of my favorite participants showed up with a glass full of crystals and a special water concoction. He must have found our flyer at the Co-op, because he didn't live in Orchard Downs, and was there to take photos for his debut album. He was a total natural in front of the camera, and absolutely unforgettable. (See Figure 2)



Figure 2. Participant at Orchard Downs

A few days later, when I started to sort through the images to begin the process of connecting them to their owners, I realized I'd made a terrible mistake. Not only had I made the process extremely cumbersome by allowing the participants to lead their own photo session (which led



Participants at Orchard Downs

to a very large amount of photos to sort through), but I also gave the participants the choice of two edited portraits, and one printed portrait. Some participants interpreted my instructions as allowing them the choice for three different photos, instead of two (one of which would be printed). This increased the amount of time I spent editing photos, making for a very complicated system that was

far too much for me to deal with while pursuing my Masters degree. While I managed to get everyone every last one of their photos, I was unable to complete the daunting task of editing or printing the amount of photos I had to get through. I am embarrassed that I failed to complete the part of this project that was meant to be a keepsake for the participants that arrived at Orchard Downs to get their photo taken that day. Not one of them received a printed image.



Participants at Orchard Downs

III. Urbana Farmer's Market, February 2020



Participant at Urbana Farmer's Market

After taking some time to reflect on the Orchard Downs experience with the photo booth, and identifying a time that would work with Maxwell, I worked with Rachel Storm to get us a booth at the Urbana Farmer's Market. I made some modifications to the project, opting to keep the check-in process which was very effective, and asking participants to choose whether they wanted a printed photograph. Most participants opted for emailed images, which significantly cut down the time required for turnaround.

Once again, we were met with a wide variety of participants. Several of the portraits were of the vendors from the farmer's

market, but there were a few that were of other members of the community. One of the most memorable sessions we had was with a couple who were recently engaged and were excited to take their photo together. Another participant was having her first outing with her newborn baby, and was thrilled to get their photo taken. Two of my friends also came to show support and we ended up having a fun photo session that reminded us of teen trips to the mall for wallet glamour shots. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Friends at the Urbana Farmer's Market



Participants at Urbana Farmer's Market.

This iteration of *Flash Photo Project* was significantly smoother and lent itself to a faster turnaround and completion. I received quite a few compliments in emailed feedback, and we were glad to have made this happen.



Participants at Urbana Farmer's Market.

IV. Conclusion, Future Considerations

The purpose of this project was to engage common folks—particularly of diverse ethnic backgrounds—in portraiture, bringing an often pricey service to a comfortable community setting and leaving residents of Urbana with a gift. In some ways, *Flash Photo Project* was a success. For example, we managed to photograph a vastly diverse group of people at Orchard Downs, both ethnically and in life stages. The crowd at the farmer's market did not prove to be very diverse, but I was appreciative of the experience nonetheless, since it offered many social issues to ponder for future iterations of this project. For one, it is evident that the majority of people who frequent the



Participants with photographer Maxwell Heller at Orchard Downs.

Urbana Farmer's Market are white, so another place might have been a better choice if capturing diversity was my intention. I'd originally picked El Progreso, but given that I have never formed a relationship with that establishment, it felt incredibly unnatural to request for them to make room in their store to accommodate my mobile photo studio. Perhaps had we not been forced to cut this project short due to the pandemic, I might have taken the necessary steps to present this project to El Progreso or another location with a more diverse crowd.



Here I am, checking someone in for their photo session at Urbana Farmer's Market

I hope to continue doing this work in the future, and have learned from this experience to simplify by paring the project down. Ideally, I would have been able to purchase an instant photo printer with my grant money. This would have made all the editing, emailing, and reinventing this project unnecessary and residents would have received the gift I intended for them to have, a printed photo. However, the limitation of not being able to purchase equipment made it so that I had to problem solve in other ways, which proved to be educational. Still, were I to do this again, I will have a device available to print participants' images instantly.

I am incredibly grateful for the experience I collected while doing this project, and for the City of Urbana's support in this opportunity. I am thrilled to have interacted with so many people, which shifted my understanding of who Urbana is for the better. I learned of how complex the population of this city is, and how totally generous and sweet the residents of this place are. Maxwell and I were trusted to capture so many special moments, and for that I am so thankful.



Participant with photographer Maxwell Heller at Orchard Downs.